

Thank you very much for that kind introduction, and for the opportunity to be here at the University of Idaho on a glorious spring day promising hope and opportunity for this graduating class of 2009.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to thank someone who has become a good friend, someone who has given generously of his time to help me learn more about the exceptional people and amazing work of this institution.

President Steven Daley-Laursen, I would like to take a moment in this most public and appropriate of settings to acknowledge and applaud your extraordinary service to this school. I want to express the gratitude of all of us for the exemplary job you have done as president of the University of Idaho.

And now for the graduates of 2009.

You are fortunate.

Less than a quarter of Idaho's high school students obtain a degree in any post-high school educational program. That statistic is one of the great tragedies and failures of Idaho, a place we all love, but also a state where too few of our leaders embrace the moral and economic values of higher education.

We need more leaders like Burton French, a young man who was elected to the state Legislature while still attending the University of Idaho. Just one year after his graduation from this school he won election to the U.S. House of Representatives. He held Idaho's lone seat in the House for two years, and when the state earned a second seat, he was the very first person elected to represent the First Congressional District.

Congressman French was one of a host of people who have embedded in this institution a storied history of graduates who become leaders in all walks of life. They have woven a rich legacy for which this university's professors, its administrators, its alumni and all of us are justifiably very proud.

I have only to look across the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., to the U.S. Senate, where my friend and colleague, Senator Jim Risch, continues to serve Idaho as he has done so well for many years. He is now following a legacy in the U.S. Senate crafted by fellow Vandals Larry Craig, Dirk Kempthorne, Steve Symms and Jim McClure.

This university's legacy of leadership includes public servants such as diplomat Philip Habib, athletes and community leaders such as Jerry Kramer, and distinguished jurists such as Linda Copple Trout, the first woman to serve on the Idaho Supreme Court.

The University of Idaho has been spectacularly successful in creating leaders in all fields, a record unmatched by any other educational institution in the state. It builds leaders carefully, in much the same way the company I once headed, Trus Joist Corporation, designed and built the landmark building where we have gathered today.

In 1975 this spot was a wooded hilltop, and I was a newly minted plant manager in Boise. That spring the plant I ran manufactured the steel components which help support the Kibbie Dome's roof. Back then I could not have imagined that I might someday be standing on a podium inside, addressing the university's graduates in this, the largest clear-span, free-standing wood structure in the world.

Today I am honored after the end of a 35 year career in business and while still early into a new career in public service to be able to offer some observations as you take the first steps on the next path in your still young adult lives.

I know that the challenges of mastering your major, learning new life skills and juggling a busy social life still linger vividly in your minds as you contemplate leaving dear friends and entering professional careers.

The University of Idaho has prepared you well for your next step, of that I am sure. However, I know that you are about to set forth into a world beset with staggeringly difficult, monumental problems.

We face a growing nuclear threat around the world, with unstable countries such as North Korea and Pakistan encouraging dangerous combinations of radicalism and advanced science.

We face a changing climate, one that threatens to wreak havoc on everything from the world's food supply, its sources of energy, to the very existence of some low lying nations.

We face the challenge of too many in our midst being cut off from access to quality education, leaving them ill-prepared to understand and embrace the changing technology of the 21st century.

We face an exploding world population at a time when there remains a preponderance of grinding poverty in many nations creating millions of desperate people without the means to provide for their families.

And we face in the world a continuing assault by ever-bolder and more electronically intrusive governments on the basic rights of privacy, speech and personal liberty--the key freedoms which underlie and provide the foundation for all Western democracies.

The task of meeting and overcoming these challenges will increasingly fall to all of you. How your generation deals with these life and death issues, and how you respond to challenges of a more personal nature, will be based on your values and character, your education and life experiences, and your vision for your future,.

But know this:

Those who achieve the very most, those who change lives and those who make entire communities and societies better places for future generations do so by being driven to lead.

Leadership will help you find success. It will open opportunities both unexpected and desired. But most important, the cultivation of leadership skills will help you forge an approach to life which builds consensus and commitment among those who come to share your goals.

So I am here today to urge you make pursuit of leadership skills a core goal as you live your life.

I do this because I worry about the future of our nation. There has never – NEVER – been a time in our history when there has been a more urgent need for young leaders than right now in these times of uncertainty, change and struggle.

Whether you realize it or not, your conscious decisions about how you choose to live your life beginning this day, will define whether you become one of the leaders our nation and our world so desperately need.

Some leaders are those to whom our society traditionally and most frequently ascribes status: the CEO, the quarterback, the governor, the platoon leader. If you are one of the fortunate few whom society has pegged as a “natural leader,” others will look to you for direction and for clues as to where they themselves should go. General George Patton was such a leader.

Other leaders inspire by articulating and then personifying a vision of a different and better society. Their leadership comes not just from their inspirational passion and vision but also from seeing obstacles, identifying a path forward and building consensus on the best way achieve the common goal. Mahatma Gandhi and how he led India to independence comes to mind.

Too often our society looks upon leaders solely as managers. We expect our leaders to define a common goal and then set an agenda for those who follow. However, leaders can also, through invention and discovery, all alone, remove obstacles so that others can succeed in implementing significant change. I think of Dr. Jonas Salk and the eradication of polio.

And leaders can be those who are philanthropic and community spirited, people who influence the world around them by how they choose to share their material success and by allowing their deeds to speak for themselves. This form of leadership is especially frequent in this digital age. I think of Bill Gates and his passion for attacking disease in Africa.

As I reflect upon these very different kinds of leaders, I am struck by how few people can lay claim to being a leader in all four categories. Not long ago we lost a great Idahoan who did just that.

Jack Simplot passed away last year after an amazing life of leadership.

He was above all else an inspiration. Long after his company had grown into one of the largest in the world, Jack defied tradition by staying at the helm far beyond normal retirement. His time there was most notable for his ability to offer a vision for success and for the will to succeed he inspired in so many others. Jack did this all thanks to a series of pioneering discoveries, which gave so many Idahoans good jobs and which allow all of us to enjoy French-fried, Idaho potatoes no matter where we go in the world.

And, most important of all, he gave back – again and again to so many needy people and worthwhile causes around the world--and especially here, in Idaho.

I will say very briefly that I knew Jack from my first job-hunting trip to Idaho. Later, I lived in his shadow as a Boise businessman. For nearly 40 years I awoke morning after morning to learn of another successful company he had founded, another downtown renewal project he had championed, another charitable cause he had advanced and another life he had changed.

I admire Jack Simplot to this day, despite the fact he refused to offer me that job I so desperately sought that morning we first met.

Not surprisingly, he thought the \$20,000 salary I sought was just way too much money.

Jack is but one in a long line of leaders our nation has been blessed to know and to follow.

Thomas Jefferson showed an unparalleled leadership of intellect. When then-President Kennedy invited all living U.S. Nobel Prize winners to join him for dinner at the White House, the President said it was the most intellectual firepower assembled in one room since Thomas Jefferson used to dine there alone.

Jefferson gave our nation both the intellectual foundation and the political tapestry for the Constitution upon which all of our institutions rest. Later, as President, he applied the new Constitution's carefully delineated powers for the long term benefit of our still-forming democracy.

Henry David Thoreau, one of my favorite authors, showed the ultimate leadership of vision. His most famous work, *Walden*, was composed almost entirely in solitude, yet it still shines as a beacon in the ongoing movement toward a better world, one where we set aside those things which are temporal for the transcendental vision of a universe where all things spiritual and material are interrelated, of value and eternal.

Ansel Adams showed amazing leadership in his passion for the wild. His work documented through black and white photographs the landscapes of this great nation. His artistry with a camera provided unimpeachable testimony to the people of this urbanizing civilization that our remaining unspoiled wildness is worth protecting for future generations.

And I could not speak on leadership without recognizing those who arose to bring this nation new hope out of the unsavory exploitation and pain caused by the ugliest side of humanity.

In his own solitude, Dr. Martin Luther King forged a leadership of courage which resonates in every classroom, every church, every freedom-loving home and every caring heart in our great nation.

Dr. King committed his life to equality and standing firm for what is right and just.

He changed the way this country thinks of itself. How fundamentally we could never fully comprehend until that great, inspiring moment on a cold morning in January when our nation welcomed a new president who represents all of the promise Dr King prophesied.

From these leaders and from others I have known in my own life I have developed some core principles to help me on my own travel through the disappointments and successes of life, regardless of whether the path proved smooth or rocky and steep.

These principles have been crucial to what success I've had, and I believe they will also stand you in good stead as you look for ways to effect change, and as you search to perfect your own brand of personal leadership.

First, be honest in all you do.

One of the core reasons for success in business or life is constant awareness of the need to fulfill obligations to those to whom we owe something either monetary or intangible, and to demonstrate integrity in all that we do. One cannot lead without being found trustworthy and responsible by those who follow.

Second, be generous with praise and opportunity.

We must give ample credit to those who have been part of our successes-- those who have helped make those achievements possible. The best leaders build teams, not personal monuments. We must recognize that personal achievement and recognition is far less important than the success of the team we ask others to join.

Third, think before you leap.

We would all do well to measure objectives carefully against all possible outcomes before we make major decisions. Real leaders are cautious, and consider the consequences before committing followers to a preferred course of action. There is no honor in leading your team off the edge of a cliff.

And fourth, work hard.

Put simply, there is no one thing which will have a greater impact on your ability to lead and your potential to succeed than will the simple discipline of rising at 5 AM every morning, and pledging to work one hour longer than your rival and your boss.

Achieving great things and becoming a leader for your peers and your community takes a daily devotion to excellence. You must continuously adapt to the changes around you.

The unexpected will rear its head and knock you off your stride. You will be bruised and bloodied. You will have financial trouble. Your marriage will at times be difficult. Your children will sometimes disappoint. You will get sick or hurt.

In short, it will not be easy.

Not long ago, I read a story about a young man who has faced so much more than any of us ever will. His leadership has become a strong inspiration in my own life.

This young man threatens to bring one of the world's most powerful totalitarian regimes to its knees. He has caused wholesale upheaval in its institutions, and he has inspired millions of people to stare down their government and demand change.

He has done all of this alone, under the isolation of house arrest and with almost no contact with the outside world.

Last December 10th, Liu Xiaobo led 302 determined colleagues in issuing a manifesto calling on the Chinese Communist Party to abandoned totalitarian government in favor of Democracy. Mr. Liu was arrested shortly before the manifesto was released, and has been detained ever since.

The document which caused him to be confined in a windowless room, without access to books or writing materials, is as simple as those in the founding documents of this country which have inspired us all for over 200 years.

Mr. Liu wrote that, quote: "The most fundamental principles of democracy are that the people are sovereign, and that the people select their own government."

He signed his name to those simple but powerful words despite having already spent two years in prison for his part in the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square, and three years in a work camp for challenging China's one-party rule.

His leadership has inspired me, and I am pleased to announce today that next week I will introduce a resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives calling on China to immediately release Mr. Liu and begin making strides toward true representative democracy.

I ask each of you and the rest of my constituents to write letters to the U.S. Secretary of State and urge her to take up Mr. Liu's cause by demanding the Chinese government grant his release.

Pursuing Mr Liu's case and his cause is my graduation pledge to each of you.

In return, I would like to ask each 2009 University of Idaho graduate to make a pledge to me.

I challenge you to do four things. Not for me in a personal sense, but for you and the kind of impact you intend to make with your life.

First, I challenge you to spend one full week working for free and giving back to society. Spend seven, 12-hour days painting and landscaping your church, washing dishes at your local soup kitchen, helping refugee children learn English, or delivering hot meals to the elderly. Prove to yourself that you can give back in deeds and sweat, not just lip service and words.

Second, I challenge you to spend three days in a remote tent or a cabin with a notebook and a pen, all alone. You are only truly ready to lead others when you understand yourself. Time away from other people to read, think and contemplate your future will give you, as it did Thoreau, focus on what is truly important and a game plan for living your life to achieve it.

Third, I challenge you to give up your most important creature comfort for 30 days and tell no one you are doing it. The inward focus of bettering yourself through sacrifice will prepare you well for the day when you decide to set aside your own desires to help your community meet a larger common goal.

And finally, I challenge you to find the person you have most hurt since you arrived here at the University of Idaho and tell him or her that you are truly sorry. You cannot lead others unless you can face up to and deal with your own shortcomings. By this act, prove you can acknowledge when you have been self-centered and wrong.

I want to close by thanking all of you very sincerely for the opportunity to be here. It is one of the great honors I have been accorded.

Please, each of you, accept my congratulations on your accomplishments. I trust that you will find some of what I have said will be useful as you go forward in life.

I hope you will accept my challenges, remember my suggestions and hear my plea for pursuing a path of leadership. Doing so has the power to transform your life--and to change the world.

Thank you and Godspeed.